

Matthew 16:13-18

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you wake up and it seems brighter than it should be in the room, an important question is "What time is it?" You want to know if the alarm went off or not and if you are going to be late for work or school.

If you have been working hard all day and you are really hungry and you feel like Esau, ready to sell your birthright for a cup of soup, "what is there to eat" seems like a very important question.

If you are meeting with the doctor after having a biopsy the all-important question would be, "is it cancer or not?" And if it is, "is this kind of cancer curable?"

Each day we face situations that move us to ask what we consider to be important questions. Sometimes they are so important that the answer might mean life or death. But there is one question that is more important than any other question. It's the question Jesus asked his disciples and that he asks each of us. "Who do you say I am?"

Who is Jesus? That's life's most important question because the answer determines whether you have eternal life or not, whether you are a part of the church against which the gates of Hades cannot prevail, or whether you will be captured by Hades.

Jesus and his disciples had been out among the people. There had been huge crowds almost everywhere Jesus went as indicated by his feeding of the five thousand. Jesus must have decided that it was time for a little break, time for some rest so that the disciples could be focused on what was most important. So Jesus took his disciples on a walk way up to the northern borders of Israel, north of the Sea of Galilee near the headwaters of the Jordan River. It was there that he would test their focus. It was there that he would ask them life's most important question.

But before he asked them who they thought he was, he asked them what they were hearing from the crowds. What were people in general saying about him? Who did the people think he was? They had heard people suggest that maybe Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead. That was a theory to which Herod subscribed. Some people, considering the miracles they had either seen or heard about from others, and considering the way he confronted the Jewish leaders, were reminded of Elijah or Jeremiah. They thought maybe one of those great Old Testament prophets had come back to life. But it is interesting that they don't mention hearing that people were thinking that he might be the promised Messiah.

Early in his ministry there were those who wondered, "could he be the Messiah?" But it seems that the disciples were not hearing this any longer. No one could deny that Jesus was someone special. It had been over 400 years since there had been anyone who spoke with the authority of a prophet of God and even longer since anyone had done such fantastic miracles like the ones Jesus was doing. But what was he doing for them? After he fed the five thousand he refused to let them make him a king. He wasn't gathering an army or talking like he was going to fight the Romans. He wasn't doing the things they thought the Messiah should do, so the general population seems to have given up on the idea that he might be their Messiah.

Still today there are many whose presuppositions get in the way seeing Jesus for who he really is. There are those who believe that there are no such things as miracles, who have been taught that the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible never really happened; they've been

taught that the disciples exaggerated things or made things up to make Jesus seem greater than he actually was.

If Jesus were to ask us what we hear the crowds saying about him the answer would be similar to what the disciples were hearing. Many people today are saying that Jesus was a great person, maybe even a prophet of God, just like Moses and Mohammed, and maybe they might throw in Buddha and Gandhi. Like the other prophets, if you find something Jesus said helpful, use it. If Jesus said something you don't like, ignore it. Like the crowds of Jesus' day, people are still "me" focused. They are asking, "does Jesus fit my idea of a Messiah? Does he say what I want to hear? What's he doing that will help improve my life right here and now?"

Jesus didn't spend time pointing out the foolishness of such answers. He wanted to see if those answers had affected his disciples. He wanted to hear how they would answer the most important question of life. He asked them, **What about you; who do you say I am?**

Peter didn't hesitate. He didn't even raise his hand and wait for the Teacher to call on him. He confidently confessed, **you are the Christ, the son of the living God.**

There's a lot of truth packed into that short sentence. Peter doesn't agree with all the talk about Jesus being some Old Testament prophet who had come back to life. No. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. He is the promised Savior, the one God's people had been looking for and waiting for since God made the promise to Adam and Eve in the Garden. And Peter was convinced that Jesus was not just another prophet like Moses or Elijah or Jeremiah. He was greater than all the prophets put together. He was convinced that Jesus was the **son of the living God.**

Now that's an amazing confession not only because it was contrary to what most people were thinking. It was amazing because Peter was with Jesus every day. Yes, he saw the miracles first hand, but he also saw Jesus' humanity first hand. He saw that he got tired and had to rest. He saw him get hungry and have to eat. He saw that Jesus was a real human being in every way and yet he confessed that Jesus was the Son of the living God. He confessed something that was contrary to what his eyes were seeing.

Peter confessed the truth by faith. And Jesus says, **Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.**

Jesus states what has been true and always will be true—no one can answer the most important question of life correctly on their own. Human philosophies, or own natural inclinations, might make Jesus a great person, an example of love, even a prophet, but they will never lead us to acknowledge the truth confessed by Peter, that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, the one and only Savior of all. Paul put it another way, **no one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.**

By nature we think that the idea that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary is complete foolishness. By nature we think that someone, that Jesus could be true God and true man at the same time is craziness. By nature we think that the idea that Jesus is the fulfillment of a promise made by God way back in Genesis is absurd. By nature we don't even want to accept that God created everything that exists in six normal days. The idea that Jesus won salvation for the world by living and dying in our place is contrary to everything we think we know. What we know is that if you want something you have to earn it.

So the correct answer to life's most important question is not something Peter, or we, could come up with on our own. It is not something we could learn from studying all of mankind's

philosophy books. It is something that has to be revealed to us by God himself. He does reveal it to us in his word, the Bible. And as we hear and study the Bible the Holy Spirit is at work. He first of all convicts us of sin and makes us see that we are not gods, we are not able to save ourselves, we are lost and condemned sinners who need a savior. Then he points us to Jesus and shows us that he is the Christ the son of the living God, the savior of the world. He moves us and enables us to confess with Peter the correct answer to life's most important question.

Jesus told Peter that it was on the rock solid truth that he had confessed, that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Son of God, that he would build his church. Everyone who has had this truth revealed to them by the Father and who has been moved by the Holy Spirit to believe and confess this truth is part of Jesus' church. And it's important to be a part of Jesus church because he promises that the Gates of Hades will not prevail against his church. Satan and his demons will attack. Satan is a roaring lion looking to devour everyone he can. Death seems to be victorious as even those who confess that Jesus is the Son of the Living God die. But when we resist Satan, trusting in Jesus, Satan has to tuck his pointy tail between his legs and run the other way. And Jesus rose from the dead on the third day so that we would know that **death has been swallowed up in victory**. As we heard in the reading from Revelation, John saw the church, all those from Israel and from every tribe, people, nation and language who confessed with Peter that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God standing before the throne of God and of the lamb, living and reigning with him for all eternity. The Gates of Hades did not prevail against them.

Who do you say Jesus is? Those who answer that he is merely a great man, a prophet, an example to follow, will have to stand on their own and the gates of Hades will prevail against them. But those who answer, you who answer, that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Savior of the world, the Son of the living God, your personal savior from sin, you are a part of Jesus' church. You are built on the rock of truth and the gates of Hades will never prevail against you.